



# BEYOND THE EXHIBITS

## North Carolina Museum of History

### **“You Have to Start a Thing” Exhibit**

The year 2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution. *“You Have to Start a Thing”* explores how Tar Heel women and men fought for—and against—woman suffrage in the decades leading up to 1920. It also chronicles the ongoing struggle to ensure voting rights for North Carolinians of color and the (slow) entry of women into positions of political power in our state.

Below is additional information connecting *“You Have to Start a Thing”* to educational resources. For the richest student experience, complete the educational packet:

- Read “‘You Have to Start a Thing’: NC Women Fight for the Right to Vote” from the Fall 2019 issue of the *Tar Heel Junior Historian* Magazine.
- Answer the “You Have to Start a Thing” discussion questions.
- Watch Introduced by museum educator Sally Bloom and curator of political and social history Raelana Poteat, [“You Have to Start a Thing”](#) shares actors’ portrayals of differing opinions on woman suffrage based on actual speeches, letters, newspaper articles, and propaganda circulating in North Carolina between the 1890s and 1920.
- Review the “Could You Have Voted” graphic from the Spring 2020 issue of the *Tar Heel Junior Historian* Magazine.
- Complete the “Have a Say—Vote Today!” activity.





Miss G. Weil  
North Carolina



Above: Delegate badge worn by Gertrude Weil at the National American Woman Suffrage Association convention in 1917.  
Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

## "You Have to Start a Thing": NC Women Fight for the Right to Vote

by RaeLana V. Poteat

**H**ave you ever been the first person to believe in something, or to stand up for what you think is right? Being the first to support a cause may make you feel excited, but it can also be a bit lonely and scary. Can you imagine being one of the first women in North Carolina to stand up and publicly say that women deserved the right to vote?

Today, that seems like a no-brainer. Was there really a time when people thought that women weren't just as entitled as men to have a say in their government or to run for

office? For centuries, both men and women have believed that a woman's place was in the home—as a wife and mother—not in the "public" sphere of business, politics, and voting.

Wyoming gave women the right to vote in 1869, and, slowly, some states in the western part of the United States followed. By the early 1900s, activists in many parts of the country were campaigning for "woman suffrage" (women's right to vote). But the South, and North Carolina in particular, was a very socially conservative place,



Opposite page, left to right: Gertrude Weil, Sallie Dortch, and Cornelia Jerman working at the NC Equal Suffrage Association headquarters in 1920. (Note that Cornelia's son and the family dog appear to be helping, too.) In North Carolina, most of the hard work for suffrage was done by women sitting at a desk—writing letters to potential supporters and legislators, drafting petitions, and writing speeches or articles for newspapers. There were no major suffrage parades or protests held here.

Above: Look closely and you can see the Raleigh headquarters of the North Carolina Equal Suffrage Association and of the antisuffrage States' Rights Defense League, side by side on Fayetteville Street. The headquarters for the Southern Rejection League was also just across the street. Awkward! Images courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.



Helen Morris Lewis, president of the first suffrage organization in North Carolina. Image by Alvaro Santistevan, courtesy of Clint McCrory, Athens, Georgia.

where even most women opposed the idea. So, imagine the bravery it took for the first Tar Heel women to call for **suffrage**—to stand up, speak out, and put their voices into the oppressive silence all around them.

In Asheville, in 1894, Helen Morris Lewis and her friend, Floride Cunningham, became the first two women to publicly advocate for woman suffrage and start a woman suffrage group in our state. Helen was a member of a national woman suffrage organization and believed that more North Carolinians would support suffrage if they better understood the cause. So, she organized and gave a speech at a meeting at the town courthouse. The *Asheville Citizen Times* reported, "Agitation for woman's suffrage in North Carolina had its beginning in Asheville last evening." Asheville's mayor introduced both women and offered his support. A week later he hosted a meeting where both women and men formed the North Carolina Equal Rights Association. Helen was elected its president. In 1897 the association convinced a state senator from Yancey County to introduce a bill to "provide for woman suffrage" in North Carolina. But legislators promptly referred



**SUFFRAGE:** the right to vote in an election

**WOMAN SUFFRAGE:** women's right to vote

the bill to the Committee on Insane Asylums (yes, a joke!), and it never received a vote.

Despite Helen's efforts and enthusiasm, her organization petered out by around 1900. More than a decade passed before any new action was taken. Then, in 1913, a few scattered local suffrage leagues began forming.

Several Morganton women marched in the town's 1913 Fourth of July parade carrying "Votes for Women" banners. Two weeks later they formed the Morganton Equal Suffrage League to "aid in securing equal suffrage." In September, Ella Clapp Thompson started a league in Bakersville, Mitchell County.

In October seven women got together in Charlotte to create our first statewide suffrage organization: the North Carolina Equal Suffrage League. North Carolina was the last state to form one. These initial founders were all either from Charlotte or were related to someone who lived there. But the league quickly added members from across the state.

(continued on page 18)



Barbara Henderson (1880–1955) was a founder and the first president of the NC Equal Suffrage League. Both she and her husband, University of North Carolina professor Archibald Henderson (left), wrote and spoke for suffrage across the state. She believed suffrage could only be achieved in North Carolina through a very conservative approach. She denounced militancy, promoted her status as a mother, and emphasized male supporters of woman suffrage. Images courtesy of Skyland magazine.





Charlotte Hawkins Brown (1883–1961) founded Palmer Memorial Institute, a school for African American children in Guilford County. She was also one of the founders of the North Carolina Federation of Negro Women's Clubs (NCFNWC) service organization, whose motto was "Lifting as we climb." Brown supported woman suffrage, believing that it would help not just black women but all African Americans. Brown continued to fight for voting rights her entire life. Image courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.

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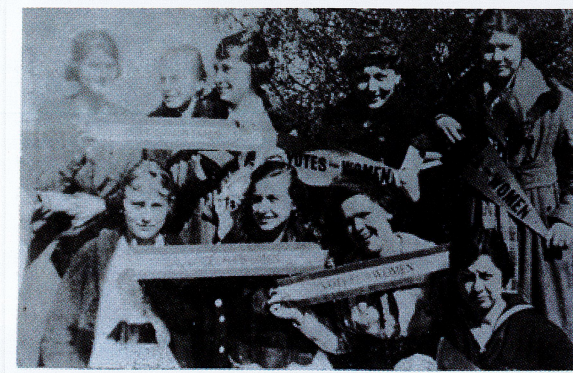
During 1914, the National American Woman Suffrage Association sent one of their professional organizers to North Carolina. Lavinia Engle spoke in cities and small towns, promoting the benefits of woman suffrage and helping to form more local leagues. Barbara Henderson (see page 17), new president of the state league, called for additional members, saying, "Women of Carolina: Your state needs your service. For the sake of your homes and your children, lay aside your smaller tasks for the time and flock to the standard of a larger service."

The suffragists worked hard to convince North Carolinians that woman suffrage was fair, just, and inevitable. They wrote letters and newspaper articles, sponsored suffrage lectures, and lobbied legislators.

By the end of 1915, local leagues had been formed in Charlotte,

Raleigh, Greensboro, Asheville, Morganton, Hickory, Bakersville, Winston-Salem, Salisbury, High Point, Chapel Hill, Reidsville, Henderson, Kinston, New Bern, Goldsboro, Greenville, and Washington. But most North Carolinians were still not on board with woman suffrage, and not all the leagues were still active. Even by the end of 1917, Lula Roberts Platt, president of the North Carolina Equal Suffrage League (or North Carolina Equal Suffrage Association, as it was also called), could only report on 175 members statewide. In comparison, our neighboring state, Virginia, had 115 local chapters and thousands of members.

Over time, more and more North Carolinians slowly became persuaded that women deserved the right to vote, and the North Carolina League increased its membership. But many citizens and politicians hadn't changed



their minds. The state legislature chose not to become the final state to ratify the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which reads: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." But when Tennessee ratified the amendment, it still became the law of the land in August 1920. 🌸

RaeLana V. Poteat is the curator of political and social history at the North Carolina Museum of History and curated the museum's exhibit "You Have to Start a Thing" about the fight for women's suffrage in North Carolina.

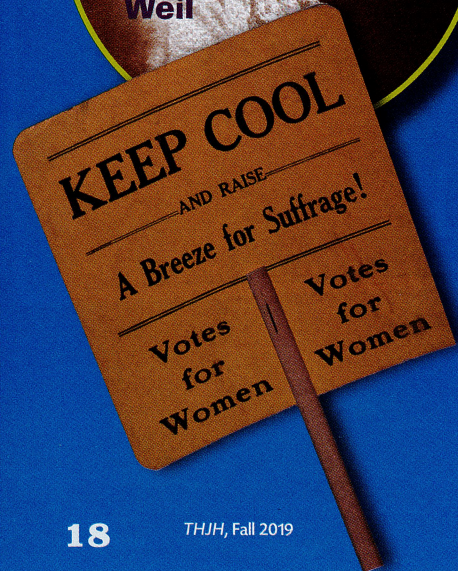


Above: Three of the founders of the North Carolina Equal Suffrage League—Anna Forbes Liddell, Suzanne Bynum, and Mary Belle Palmer—rode on this Votes for Women float in a May 1914 parade in Charlotte. Despite many well-known national suffrage parades, this is the only suffrage float historians have documented in a North Carolina parade. Image courtesy of The Charlotte Observer.

Above, left: These enthusiastic students from the State Normal and Industrial College (now UNC–Greensboro) were likely encouraged in their activism by their history and political science teacher, Harriet Elliott (second from right, back row), who was herself a prominent suffragist. Image courtesy of UNC-G.



Gertrude Weil



## Suffs vs. Antis

Women and men who supported woman suffrage became known as "Suffs," while those who opposed it were called "Antis."

We might find it surprising that some women did not want the right to vote, but there were plenty of Tar Heels who did not.

Almost all the women and men who fought publicly for or against suffrage were wealthy or relatively well-off white people. While working-class whites may have had opinions about suffrage, most did not have the time or resources to actively participate in the struggle. And the suffrage of African American and American Indian men was already severely limited

by Jim Crow voting restrictions.

Most Suffs had a few things in common. They tended to be well educated. At a time when far fewer people received a college education, many Suffs attended university (some at well-known northern institutions), and a few even had advanced degrees. Suffs had exposure to life in other parts of the country or world. They were likely to have traveled out of state or to have moved to North Carolina from places where woman suffrage was more accepted. And

they were more likely to work, or to have worked, outside the home.

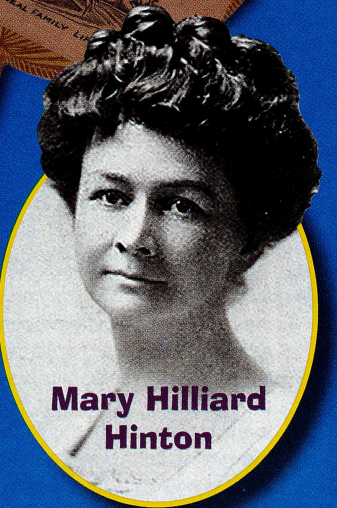
Antis were less likely to have received a college education or to have held a job. Their families were often wealthy landowners or textile mill owners or were associated with railroads. (Families involved in managing North Carolina's large textile-mill industry were particularly afraid that women would vote to protect workers' rights and limit child labor.) Antis wanted to maintain a social structure that gave whites control over African Americans. They feared woman suffrage would allow black women to eventually overcome the Jim Crow educational requirements that had kept many black men from voting. And they worried that a federal suffrage

amendment would open the door to the federal government telling southern states they could no longer limit the suffrage of people of color. (The vast majority of Suffs also wanted to maintain white supremacy, but they believed that woman suffrage would not affect white political control in the South.)

Opposite page: Gertrude Weil, of Goldsboro, was one of North Carolina's most well-known suffragists. She was president of the North Carolina Equal Suffrage Association from 1917 until women got the vote in 1920.

Right: Mary Hilliard Hinton, of Wake County, was one of our most well-known antisuffragists. She was president of the North Carolina branch of the Southern Rejection League.

Both pages: Before air-conditioning, hand fans were everywhere in the South. What better place to put your suffrage message? Images courtesy of the State Archives of North Carolina.



Mary Hilliard Hinton



## **“You Have to Start a Thing” Discussion Questions**

- What reasons did the “Suffs” give for woman suffrage?

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- What reasons did the “Antis” give against woman suffrage?

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- What methods did both sides of this debate use to make their points? Are those methods still used today?

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- What role did race relations play in the suffrage discussion?

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- What issue would you work for?

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# Could You Have Voted?

The laws about who can vote have changed many times during North Carolina's history. Read below. Pick a year. Then see whether you would have been able to vote!

1776

North Carolina's first "state" constitution is written. It links voting to wealth and property ownership.

**WHITE MEN:** Maybe. If you pay taxes, you can vote for members of the state House of Commons (representatives). If you own 50 or more acres of land, you can vote for the state senate. (Members of the General Assembly elected the governor.)

**MEN OF COLOR:** That's a big maybe... If you are a free African American or American Indian AND if you pay taxes or own 50 or more acres of land. Enslaved people of color can't vote.

**WHITE WOMEN & WOMEN OF COLOR:** Nope.

1835

North Carolina's state constitution is greatly amended. Some men gain voting rights; others lose them.

**WHITE MEN:** Yes. All white men can vote for governor and for members of the state House of Commons (representatives). Only men who own 50 or more acres of land can vote for members of the state senate.

**MEN OF COLOR:** Not anymore. Free African American and American Indian men lose their voting rights. Enslaved people of color still can't vote.

**WHITE WOMEN & WOMEN OF COLOR:** Still nope.

1868

A new state constitution is needed before North Carolina can rejoin the Union after the Civil War. All adult males gain the right to vote and hold office.

**WHITE MEN:** Yep. There are no longer any voting restrictions based on wealth or property ownership.

**MEN OF COLOR:** Yes. There are no longer any voting restrictions based on race.

**WHITE WOMEN & WOMEN OF COLOR:** Still a big no. The new constitution defines a voter as a "male person."

1900

A "suffrage" amendment is added to the state constitution. It effectively eliminates voting rights for most men of color by imposing poll taxes, literacy tests, and other voter suppression tactics.

**WHITE MEN:** Probably. Poll taxes (a tax that must be paid before voting) discourage voting among some poor whites. But most white men can avoid being disqualified by literacy tests due to a "grandfather clause" that allows them to vote if they, or their direct ancestor, could vote on January 1, 1867.

**MEN OF COLOR:** Probably not. Poll taxes and intentionally unfair voter registration requirements stop most African American and American Indian men from voting.

**WHITE WOMEN & WOMEN OF COLOR:** More than a century of still no. The woman suffrage movement is barely on the radar in North Carolina.

1920

The 19th Amendment to the US Constitution grants voting rights to women. Jim Crow voter suppression methods continue to disenfranchise most women of color.

**WHITE MEN:** Yes. North Carolina repeals the law requiring payment of a poll tax for voting, so nothing limits the voting rights of white men.

**MEN OF COLOR:** Most likely not. Literacy tests are still unfairly applied to African American and American Indian men, severely limiting the number who can register to vote.

**WHITE WOMEN:** Finally, yes. The 19th Amendment, which is ratified without North Carolina's support, gives white women the right to vote for the first time.

**WOMEN OF COLOR:** Very unlikely. Literacy tests and other Jim Crow voter suppression methods stop most African American and American Indian women from voting.

1965

The US Congress passes the Voting Rights Act. This legislation ends literacy tests and allows the federal government to monitor voter registration policies in areas known to have suppressed voting access. It allows people of color to regain access to voter registration.

**WHITE MEN:** Yes. All white men age 21 or older can vote.

**MEN OF COLOR:** At last, yes. Men of color in North Carolina regain full access to voter registration.

**WHITE WOMEN:** Yep. All white women age 21 and older can vote.

**WOMEN OF COLOR:** At long last, yes. Women of color finally gain equal access to voting.

1971

The 26th Amendment to the US Constitution lowers the voting age from 21 to 18. All US citizens who are 18 years or older and who are not serving a felony sentence can vote.

**WHITE MEN:** Still good.

**MEN OF COLOR:** Yes.

**WHITE WOMEN:** You bet.

**WOMEN OF COLOR:** Yep.

## Words to Know

**SUFFRAGE:** the right to vote

**DISENFRANCHISE:** to deprive someone of the right to vote



## Have a Say—Vote Today!

Make copies of this ballot sheet and have others mark their choices. Create a ballot box for voters to place their marked ballot sheets. Choose a voting day recorder to read the ballots and tally the votes.

Have your say on four potential amendments to the United States Constitution. Review the proposed amendment text. Circle “**For**” to vote in favor of the proposed amendment or circle “**Against**” to vote against the proposed amendment for each of the following. Place your ballot in a ballot box you make!

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**Amendment 1:** Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex.

*This sentence is the text of the Equal Rights Amendment, originally proposed in 1923.*

**For**

**Against**

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**Amendment 2:** The right of citizens of the United States who are 16 years of age or older to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of age.

*This amendment changes the age to vote for United States citizens from 18 and older to 16 and older.*

**For**

**Against**

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**Amendment 3:** The president and vice president shall be elected by the people of the several states and the district constituting the seat of government of the United States.

*This amendment eliminates the Electoral College and provides for the direct election of the president and vice president.*

**For**

**Against**

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**Amendment 4:** The national anthem of the United States will be “America the Beautiful,” replacing “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

*This amendment changes the national anthem (song) of the United States.*

**For**

**Against**



## Have a Say—Vote Today! Tally Sheet

Have the voting day recorder tally the ballots in the boxes below.

Amendment No.	For	Against	Total
1			
2			
3			
4			

According to the National Archives:

“The authority to amend the Constitution of the United States is derived from Article V of the Constitution. The Constitution provides that an amendment may be proposed either by the Congress with a two-thirds majority vote in both the House of Representatives and the Senate or by a constitutional convention called for by two-thirds of the State legislatures. None of the 27 amendments to the Constitution have been proposed by constitutional convention. The Congress proposes an amendment in the form of a joint resolution. Since the President does not have a constitutional role in the amendment process, the joint resolution does not go to the White House for signature or approval. The proposed amendment is sent to the States for their consideration, to each Governor. The Governors then formally submit the amendment to their State legislatures or the state calls for a convention, depending on what Congress has specified. In the past, some State legislatures have not waited to receive official notice before taking action on a proposed amendment. A proposed amendment becomes part of the Constitution as soon as it is ratified by three-fourths of the States (38 of 50 States).”